Department Submits Plan to Cut Red Tape for Public Schools

*Also Recommends Waiting to Adopt New Textbooks*

Louisiana Department of Education

November 29, 2012

BATON ROUGE, La. - As part of its comprehensive Louisiana Believes plan, the Louisiana Department of Education today released recommendations to reform and repeal state mandates to better align the rules governing public schools with the goal of improving student achievement. If the proposed changes are adopted, the Louisiana Handbook for School Administrators, or Bulletin 741, will shrink by 24 pages or about one-fifth its current length. The Department is also recommending a delay in adoption of new textbooks until the state can confirm the content is aligned to new Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math.

"Schools need to focus on student achievement, not filing reports with the state," said State Superintendent of Education John White. "State mandates that aren’t focused on student learning need to be repealed and the state needs to turn over day-to-day management decisions to the school district. If you trust educators, then you need to give the flexibility to do their job."

"If we want schools to focus on results, then we need our state rules to focus on results too," said Penny Dastugue, President of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. "Removing outdated requirements will allow schools to focus on what’s most important - raising student achievement."

The reforms will impact students as well as school district’s day-to-day management. Under the proposal, students would be able to earn credit for a course by demonstrating proficiency on an exam or portfolio of work, not just sitting through the mandated minutes of instruction. Students could also earn credit for Physical Education by taking courses that provide a minimum of 100 minutes of physical activity per week, such as dance team or other extra-curricular athletic activities. Additionally, school districts will have flexibility to adopt a school calendar that meets the needs of students.

"School superintendents have had the opportunity to review initial revisions to Bulletin 741," said Mike Faulk, President of the Louisiana Association of School Superintendents and Superintendent of Central Community Schools. "Overall the superintendents have responded favorably to the revisions as they allow for the bulletin to be updated, which has been needed for some time, and are appreciative of the flexibility being provided by many of the changes. These revisions and changes will allow local superintendents to move forward with addressing reform efforts on the state and national level. We look forward to continued discussions regarding other revisions and changes which may be considered."

"Any common sense changes to the regulations on school systems are a welcome change," said Superintendent Ascension Parish Schools Patrice Pujol. "The focus of our work in school systems and schools needs to be on teaching and learning. The fewer hours we spend on reporting to the state
department and complying with outdated rules and regulations, the more time we can devote to our primary mission of assuring high learning outcomes for all students."

Regulatory relief also applies to decisions about content and instructional materials. The proposal removes requirements that schools districts order instructional materials six months before school starts. Earlier this year, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education eliminated the requirement that districts purchase textbooks from the state-approved list.

"The proposed changes to Bulletin 741 provide districts with greater flexibility in how schools are managed," said Dr. James Meza, Superintendent of Jefferson Parish Public School System. "We support the language on hiring, evaluating and retention of school based personnel. In addition, the revised Carnegie credit policy and increased flexibility with the school calendar will free up resources and allow for innovation that we believe will not compromise district or school effectiveness. During our analysis, JPPSS identified opportunities to strengthen the proposed changes by extending instructional autonomy. LDOE was receptive to our feedback."

To support schools and school districts in the transition to Common Core State Standards, the Department is recommending a delay in entering into new seven-year contracts for textbooks. Under state regulations, the Department of Education adopts new textbooks in different subjects every year and the contract for approved instructional materials is in effect for seven years. This year, Louisiana is scheduled to adopt new textbooks for English language arts for elementary school (kindergarten to 5th grade) and math for kindergarten through 2nd grade, which are subjects impacted by the adoption of Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math that will be assessed in full for the first time starting in 2014-2015.

"Adopting new textbooks during the transition to new academic standards - especially when tests for those standards have yet to be developed - could prove to be a waste of taxpayer dollars," said White. "It is highly likely that these textbooks will be outdated in just a year or two, which is why it makes sense to wait."

In the time between now and the onset of the new standards, the Department of Education will provide teachers with sample assessments, guidance on how to transition curriculum, and professional development through the Network Team structure.

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